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ABSTRACT

Intended for writing instructors and content instructors who require writing in their courses, this document describes a college's writing skills assessment program and reviews the implications of a campus-wide approach to evaluating writing. The paper emphasizes that the scoring of placement and developmental English exit exams is done by the Composition Board, a group of English faculty and faculty from other academic departments that assumes responsibility for all writing assignment tasks, including designing and field testing topics, refining the evaluation criteria, and training new readers. The paper then outlines the development of the program, the reasons for selecting faculty from a variety of academic disciplines, and early decisions of the board (including those about a philosophy of competence, testing students, composition topics, evaluation criteria, and assessment procedures). Next, the paper describes the effectiveness of the Composition Board, the advantages of having placement decisions made by a multi-discipline faculty, and the limitations of the system. The appendix includes the evaluation scale for the writing assessment test. (EL)

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Writing Skills Assessment:

A Campus Wide Approach

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Running Head: WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Campus wide writing assessment at Mount Saint Mary College is performed by a team of trained readers from various academic disciplines. Hence, the evaluation criteria reflect the entire institution's curricula requirements. Moreover, the responsibility for developing and assessing students' writing abilities -- a responsibility traditionally delegated to English faculty -- is assumed by all faculty.

This paper furnishes a description of the writing skills assessment program at Mount Saint Mary College. In addition, this discussion reviews the implications a campus wide approach to evaluating writing has for both writing instructors as well as content instructors who require writing in their courses.

Writing Skills Assessment:
A Campus-Wide Approach

Evaluating writing skills for placement purposes is a tricky business. Philosophical and theoretical views are often compromised by practicality. Furthermore, application depends largely on the political circumstances affecting institutions. Now I do not want to be confused with that breed of faculty or administrators who blame "politics" every time something is rotten in the state of Denmark. Nonetheless, an evaluation system results from political or structural realities, making what is plausible at one college an impossibility at another.

Today I will describe for you the writing skills assessment program in practice at my institution, Mount Saint Mary College, Newburgh, New York. Ours is not a program without flaw; however, it has its share of attractive features. Perhaps most noteworthy about this assessment program is that the scoring of placement and developmental English exit exams is done not only by members of the English faculty, but also by members of other academic departments. These readers, who constitute a group known as The Composition Board, assume responsibility for all tasks involved in assessing writing skills, including designing and field-testing topics, refining the evaluation criteria and training new readers.

The writing skills assessment program remains in an embryonic state, having been conceived one year ago. I initiated its formation in response to the problems inherent in former assessment practices. Prior to my arrival at the Mount in 1983, decisions regarding placement were made by members of the English Department and my office, The College Skills Center. The program's management was poor, and the burden of scoring essays often fell into the hands of one or two individuals.

Evaluators used a measurement tool borrowed from a dissimilar institution -- an urban, public college that services a very different type of student from those we serve at the Mount. Readers assessed competence on the basis of specific features (spelling, grammar, ESL influence, diction, mastery of idiomatic use and essay length), marking whether "several errors," "occasional errors," or "few errors" occurred in the essays. Content concerns were incidental; it was of little consequence, even, if the writer failed to respond to the assigned task. The Chairperson of the English/Communication Arts Department noted,

> My colleagues and I came from a tradition where parsed nouns, split infinitives and intransitive verbs mattered. We thought that's what we should look for when evaluating writing.

One reader who operated under this evaluation system

summarized the major fault in assessing writing on the basis of error: a writer whose language is simple and whose thought processes are immature might compose an error-free paper; as writers advance and become more sophisticated, the incidence of error often increases, for they are handling more difficult structures and communicating more abstract ideas. When evaluating writing solely on the basis of error, we risk "passing" the weaker writer because of the absence of error in his/her essay, and failing the stronger, better skilled writer.

Under the previous system, each student was given a choice of one out of three essay topics. However, different tasks imposed different types of rhetorical demands: one might have called forth description; another, narration; a third, persuasion. Each essay, nevertheless, was scored identically, regardless of subject or rhetorical mode. None of the topics used were field-tested prior to their use.

A member of the English Department criticized the exam tasks because student writers needed a certain content knowledge before they could generate a sufficient response to the questions. She also faulted the tasks for placing a word-length limitation on student writers which suggested that quantity is more important to "good writing" than is quality.

The problems inherent in such an evaluation system as I have described it are, I think, glaring. Most important to note, however, is this: while the measurement tool aimed at objectivity, readers' decisions were blatantly subjective and relative. Never did any one member of the English Department define what was meant by "several errors," "occasional errors," or "few errors." As one individual who spent precious hours checking off boxes marked "several errors," "occasional errors" and "few errors" recalled, "the standards weren't all that clear."

Another reader informed me that evaluators never trained together before using this assessment tool. The Department Chair stated

> We worked in isolation from one another. It's hard for me to imagine that we didn't have full reader consensus. I just <u>assumed</u> we agreed with one another. We worked as a team for so many years on so many varied projects, and we appeared to share a common mind-set. So I figured that we were united on this issue as well. But we never trained together or read essays together or <u>talked</u>.

She further commented

> I have to say that we -- the members of my Department and I -- were dedicated to the idea of evaluating writing. But in practice,

> I dreaded the thought of those stacks of blue books arriving on my desk at what was always the worst time in the semester.

Clearly, a revised writing skills assessment program was urgently needed at the Mount. The evaluation practices provoked criticism, dissatisfation, frustration. In addition, their validity and reliability were dubious. But times can be a-changin' only when circumstances permit a change. Fortunately, this was the case at Mount Saint Mary College in the spring of 1984. The English/Communication Arts Department made clear their willingness to relinguish responsibility for evaluation and placement. In other institutions, such an accommodation may not be easily made, for English Departments across the country often depend on freshman writing courses for their survival. At the Mount, ample FTE's are generated from Communication Arts classes.

Acting with the support of a Task Force for the Improvement of Basic Skills (an ad hoc committee of the Faculty Senate) and blessings from the English Department Chairperson, I began breaking ground for an experimental assessment program.

I hustled -- literally -- faculty from various academic disciplines to serve voluntarily on the Composition Board. I selected people dedicated to the idea and practice of properly evaluating students' abilities, people willing to devote the enormous amount of time it would take to design an evaluation model, and people who possessed proficient

writing skills. The reasons for selecting members from various academic departments, as opposed to retraining English faculty, were simple.

First of all, people from the same field often share similar biases with one another which invariably threaten the fairness of a program that aims to assess something as subjective as language performance.

Secondly, what English teachers care about when assessing writing is often remarkably different from what other faculty members care about. The Chairperson of the English/Communication Arts Department expressed that the "province of English teachers is to mend crippled sentences." And, as Maxine Hairston notes, English teachers are overly concerned with all types of errors, failing to discriminate between a split infinitive and a lack of subject-verb agreement. They pose as "protectors of pure English holding off the barbarians who will corrupt the language if [they] relax [their] vigilance." (1981, p.794) While English faculty bring an invaluable perspective to any writing assessment program, theirs is not the only perspective. Non-English faculty will be eventually assessing students' writing abilities in their classes; therefore, their views of "good writing" are important to know. We are not really helping students as writers if we initially evaluate their competencies according to one standard, and then, in later semesters, assess their skills from varied perspectives.

Thirdly, and finally, assessing writing should be a responsibility that is shared by all members of the faculty, not just those who are in English Departments. English faculty have their content specialties as do historians, mathematicians, business specialists and scientists. Writing is hardly exclusive to English; it is a competency that bridges all disciplines.

Finally, as E.M. White notes, since the definition of competence

> reflects the goals and standards of the institution, many campus groups should participate in defining proficiency. Without a widely accepted definition, inappropriate and flawed testing will result, and test scores will be received with some skepticism.
>
> (p. 62)

The original membership of the Composition Board included faculty from English, computer science, mathematics, business and nursing. In addition, the Director of the Library served on the Board, since students often approach the librarians for assistance in preparing research papers. When the Board first assembled one year ago, we established ourselves as a democratic-type committee. I coordinated the activities and managed the mechanics of the Board; nevertheless, we devised a system where decisions would be made, problems solved, questions

raised and answered by all members involved. Our first step was to agree on a philosophy of competence. With minimal debate, the Board accepted Lee Odell's definition of minimal competence in writing to mean "the ability to discover what one wishes to say and to convey one's message through language, syntax and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose." (1981, pp.96 & 103)

Secondly, the Board members agreed, without hesitation, that we would test students by soliciting a single sample of writing from each. While this type of test has its limitations, and some of them are severe, composition theory informs us that actual pieces of writing provide the most accurate measure of ability. Standardized tests were rejected for, as Charles Cooper notes, these tests are often narrow, unreliable and conventional, and they fail to offer "information about what kinds of help the non-competent will need." (1981, pp. 4 & 5)

Thirdly, the Board field-tested three topics by administering them to current basic writing and composition classes. The essays solicited from these classes were also used to develop the evaluation criteria. Drafting these criteria was the Board's fourth task: each essay gathered from basic writing and composition classes was read communally by the Board. The essays were kept anonymous; readers did not know whether the essay was written by a basic writer or an English 101 student. Approximately seventy essays

were read by the Composition Board. After each reading, Board members described the writing's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, essays were rank ordered. From this process emerged the evaluation criteria and assessment procedures. [See Appendix I]

When developing the criteria, readers read each essay "holistically," meaning that each sample was read as a complete "unit of expression" and not a "sum of its parts." (White, p. 18) Holistic scoring techniques -- specifically, General Impression Marking -- continue to be used when evaluating placement essays. Holistic evaluation was selected because it is a quick, valid practice. Moreover, as Cooper notes, "Holistic evaluation by a human respondent gets us closer to what is essential in human communication." (1977, p.3)

Our assessment procedures are fairly common for any type of holistic evaluation: each student's essay is read by two readers who independently assign a score of one through six. When two readers assign grades of four or above, the essay has met the standard for "minimal competence," and the student is placed in English 101. Students who score a three or below are placed in a developmental course. When readers disagree on placement decisions, a third reader resolves the difference.

The criteria address all features of written discourse. Primarily, they concern themselves with the abilities to establish a distinct, focused purpose and to utilize appropri-

ate intellectual strategies to achieve purpose. While "shot gun" responses or circular reasoning usually merit a low score, the evaluators give writers the proverbial benefit of the doubt, recognizing that the sample was composed under highly restrictive circumstances.

The Composition Board has functioned at the Mount for a full year now. Its efforts have received the support of faculty and administrators, even though it took the College by surprise last summer by placing close to 50% of the entering class in developmental writing courses (this, of course, mirrors the national norm, but is a much higher percentage of developmental English placements than the Mount itself has known).

Devising essay topics, field-testing topics, refining the evaluation criteria, training new Board members -- these are among the duties performed by the Composition Board. At present, Board members are engaged in a preliminary evaluation of the assessment program. Correlation studies are being undertaken to determine whether holistic scores correlate with the incidences of certain errors, essay length, etc.

I remain enthusiastic about the Composition Board's efforts to date, its current role on campus, and the possible directions it may take and what it might accomplish. But I am a creature of bias. To describe its contributions, I refer to the comments made in interviews with both Board members and the Chairperson of the English/Communication Arts

Department (who is not, incidentally, a member of the Board).

Those interviewed all said that the present writing skills assessment program is a "fairer" system than the previous one. The program has a standard of evaluation that is, in the words of one member, "custom-made for our students and academic programs." The criteria were based on the writing abilities of Mount students. We are not evaluating students according to the standards of a different institution.

Another Board member said that the standard is "easily adhered to" since it was drafted by the evaluators themselves. Readers were not told what to read for or how to evaluate; they made those decisions on their own. Consequently, they feel ownership of the criteria. They believe in them.

The criteria, which, as one reader recalls, "resulted from a process of negotiation and compromise," have certain flexibility: their tenets are not carved in the proverbial stone, but are refined constantly to bring readers closer to describing with accuracy the various score points.

Board members interviewed also cited the reader training as a reason justifying their claim that our current practice is a fairer one -- for both students and evaluators! Training sessions are constantly being conducted for both new and old members, resulting in close to 92% reader agreement. Readers feel confident assessing writing abilities: they know how to weigh and measure their evaluations..

All interviewed were more than enthusiastic about the fact that the Composition Board is comprised of members from

a range of academic disciplines; not a single comment solicited even vaguely suggested that evaluation and placement might be better handled by the English faculty. One value in having a multi-discipline Board, according to a member, is that the criteria do not reflect one bias or set of biases. We do not function with a bigoted mind-set about what competent writing is. Instead, each member contributed a valued perspective that helped us expand our individual views of successful writing.

> From the math person, we learned the value of structure; from the business person, the importance of illustration; from the nursing faculty, the need for substantial reasoning. I never thought we'd be able to work together as a team and agree on a criteria. But we compromised with one another, adjusted each other's thinking, adjusted our own thinking -- all in an atmosphere of openness and trust. It was a genuine learning experience.

A second advantage to having placement decisions made by faculty other than those in the English Department is that the evaluators do not have an invested interest in keeping the number of developmental English courses at a minimal, for instance, or holding the line of 101 sections at three per semester.

Thirdly, the Composition Board gives faculty from across the disciplines a chance to see exactly what kinds of writing skills entering students possess -- or lack. This might mean less pointing of the fingers at the English faculty for "not doing a competent job teaching writing," as is the case in many institutions when sophomore and junior year students demonstrate writing weaknesses. This also means faculty support for a developmental curricula or a revised curricula.

Earlier I mentioned that a multi-discipline Board was selected because it was a fairer and perhaps a more realistic way to evaluate students' abilities. A large body of the writing students do in their college years will be judged by teachers outside the English faculty; therefore, we opted to evaluate students' skills as they will be evaluated in the majority of their classes. This fourth value, as stated by a Board member, is intertwined with the fifth advantage: the Composition Board "teaches" content course instructors ways to assess the writing they assign in their classes. Moreover, by serving on the Composition Board, content course faculty are given greater exposure to the problems student writers experience; they develop an appreciation for process and a sensitivity to the difficulties inherent in writing tasks.

A sixth advantage of the Composition Board was cited by a member who worked under the previous system:

> The Composition Board means team work. It's fun to work together with other people -- we're a support system for one another. Before, when readers worked in isolation from one another, assessment was a lonely, tedious job.

The English/Communication Arts Department Chairperson highlighted a seventh advantage to having a multi-discipline Board:

> English faculty don't have a monopoly on writing talent. There are a number of other faculty members out there who have writing skills that are superior to those of the English faculty. To assess writing, I believe you must be a good writer yourself. The Composition Board has selected as its members some of the finest, most proficient writers on campus.

Having a multi-discipline group evaluate writing skills has definite implications for instruction, particularly, though not exclusively, in content courses where writing is assigned. While these implications have already been suggested, it is worth specifying how two content course instructors perceived the Composition Board's influence on their teaching.

One faculty member from the Business Division re-

quires considerable writing from her students. Tasks range from essay exams to case study reports to research papers. Prior to her involvement with the Composition Board, she assumed her students possessed a certain level of writing competence, and she administered writing assignments accordingly. Her work on the Composition Board afforded her insight into students' actual skills and their composing problems. As a result, she is now more explicit about her expectations when assigning writing to her classes.

A Composition Board member from the Nursing Division agrees that she, too, has altered how she assigns writing. Furthermore, she claims that her training in assessment has influenced her when she evaluates students' papers.

> I learned a lot about writing from the Composition Board. Previously, I looked at only grammar and organization when I graded papers. Now I also look at thought processes, consistency, development of ideas...

This nursing instructor now feels more competent assigning and evaluating writing. Earlier, she gave a writing assignment and dictated to students how the piece should be organized. When weak papers appeared on her desk a month later, she felt helpless. Now she becomes <u>active</u> in each student's writing process. Rather than stressing an organization plan prior to writing, she talks about effective ways to communicate information to a reader.

"Audience awareness -- that's what I emphasize," she said. "I talk to my students about becoming responsible writers."

And how does she accomplish this instruction? Through conferencing students while they are engaged in composing. Her feedback, once limited to comments on grammatical structures and organization, now addresses clarity and readability.

> Not only do I see tremendous improvement in the papers after I've conferenced with the students, but also the papers I'm getting on the whole this year are substantially better than those I received in the last few years. Suddenly, I find myself giving A's again!

In the freshman English classes, the Composition Board's influence is felt as well. The English Department Chairperson noted that 101 instructors in the last two terms have observed an improved group of students. Prior to the Composition Board, they complained about the pot-luck quality of their classes; writing abilities ranged tremendously in each course. Better placement decisions are homogenizing the 101 courses, enabling the instructors to meet the objectives cited in the Department's course description. Whether or not the Composition Board has influenced the amount of writing assigned in developmental and composition courses has not been determined as of yet.

"The writing skills assessment program has indeed benefitted our freshman writing courses," the Chair commented.

> While the program doesn't impose on a teacher's freedom, it does ensure that goals will be met. It furnishes us with a yardstick to measure whether or not we're meeting objectives. And this is especially critical in competency-based instruction.

Without a doubt, the writing skills assessment program at the Mount has earned rave reviews. But what are its limitations? What are the disadvantages that inhere in the existing system? All Composition Board members who were asked to identify what they didn't like about the program unanimously proclaimed "The amount of time it requires!" Each member of the Board serves as a volunteer. The work we do is in addition to teaching, administrative and other committee responsibilities. We are, essentially, accountable to no one; what prompts us is a loyalty to one another and a commitment to "good writing." Such an operation is at risk. Members could easily abandon the Board when other priorities become pressing; the Composition Board could become a low priority for its members, dulling our conscientious efforts and causing us to make hasty, careless decisions. The

writing skills assessment program at the Mount cannot hope to survive, never mind flourish, unless it becomes institutionalized. Thus, a proposal was sent to the Faculty Senate requesting that the Composition Board be made a standing committee of the faculty.

Another peril perceived by Composition Board members and the English Department Chairperson herself is that the team of evaluators, comprised of faculty from various departments, might conceivably operate in isolation from the English Department. At present, this is not the situation. Yet there is a potential threat that this might happen. Some mechanism, therefore, must be devised that links the two groups together. We must guarantee that the evaluation criteria reflect the goals of writing instruction and that writing instruction be shaped according to the assessment program. As Edward White declares, the people "defining proficiencies through tests have a heavy obligation to ensure that definitions support the teaching of writing."

Despite the difficulties, real and potential, faced by the Composition Board, this young, innovative group has performed remarkably well to date and has made a meaningful contribution to Mount Saint Mary College. The Writing Skills Assessment program plays an integral part on the college's response to the needs of its students.

If it is possible for your institution to implement a campus-wide approach to writing assessment, I encourage

you to consider and experiment with this opportunity. On the other hand, if writing skills assessment must remain the province of the English Department, do consult with faculty from other areas to learn their views of competent writing. Let assessment practices work for, not against, the students and the curricula.

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APPENDIX I

EVALUATION SCALE FOR THE WRITING ASSESSMENT TEST (Revised)

Description of Criteria

Score Point 1: Low 100 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- General incoherence: purpose and focus are not clear
- Purpose is inappropriate for audience or task
- No discernible pattern of organization exists
- Some details may be provided that are relevant to a general statement, but essentially the essay lacks substance
- The essay shows little to no evidence of cognitive processing; intellectual strategies are not employed to achieve the essay's purpose
- The writer evidences a minimal awareness of audience; language is egocentric
- The essay is context dependent; the reader must rely on the essay question in order to comprehend the meaning inherent in the essay
- The essay is far too brief
- Frequent errors in grammatical/mechanical conventions distract from the essay's readability and thus impair communication
- The bulk of the essay is repetition of the question

Score Point 2: Mid-100 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- Essay begins with a response to the task, but does not develop that response
- The essay launches into another subject or purpose other than that assigned by the task
- Ideas are repeated frequently, presented randomly, or both
- Meaningful sentiment is not expressed; instead, a string of cliches or worn-out expressions are delivered
- The writer demonstrates some effective use of rhetorical conventions, but relies solely on conventions, or even gimmicks, and not on meaningful ideas, to achieve his/her purpose
- Writer manages his/her subject with insincere intent or treats the subject immaturely
- The argument presented is "shot gun:" a jumble of facts are delivered which do not support one specific purpose or thesis. Instead, the writer appears to have jotted down any and every idea he/she perceives as relevant to the topic
- The writer's exact opinion on the subject is not clear
- A coherent analysis of the subject is needed; the writer depends too heavily on emotional language
- Vocabulary is limited
- Meaning is lost through tangled syntax
- The writing resembles conversational speech; the writer depends on voice and not on a logical analysis to achieve purpose
- Language is elementary, immature; writing could be set to a "hearty jingle or song."
- Errors in grammar, punctuation and/or spelling distract the reader.

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Score Point 3: High 100 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- The essay provides a response to the topic
- Organization is faulty on occasion
- Ideas are underdeveloped
- Relationships between paragraphs are not established
- An apparent logic exists, but, in general, the ideas constituting the essay are substanceless
- The writer operates at the experiential level only
- The argument may be structured logically, but the ideas remain absurd, outlandish, preposterous
- The essay simply does not say anything meaningful, though the structure is without fault and no surface errors are made
- The examples and details used to demonstrate meaning are so concrete, the writer's credibility is doubtful
- Meaning is implicit, not explicit
- Language is egocentric
- Syntax is rudimentary or the range of syntactic options is limited
- Common words are misspelled
- Grammatical errors occur frequently or do not manifest themselves because of the limited range of syntactic options
- The writer "plays it safe," using only simplified expressions, sentence structures, vocabulary, etc.
- The ideas are far too repetitive; while exploration is valuable, closure is necessary

Score Point 4: Low 101 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- The development of ideas is sometimes incomplete, rudimentary or circular, but a basic logical structure exists
- The essay's purpose is clear or can be derived, even if it is not immediately apparent
- The ideas are coherent
- The details and examples used to support the purpose are relevant, though hardly plentiful
- The writer is able to conceptualize a response to the task and execute appropriate intellectual strategies to achieve purpose
- The writer may not articulate his/her stance with absolute sincerity or conviction -- indeed, the writer may appear somewhat confused by his/her position. However, he/she seems determined to explore the subject fully and discover meaning while doing so. While this may interfere with the essay's coherence, the writer's ambition is admirable, and the reader senses that the writer could compose a competent essay if offered an opportunity to revise
- Sentences are generally clear, though they might be "choppy," bulky or run-on
- An occasional error appears which may temporarily distract the reader
- Redundancy may exist because the writer appears handicapped by previous form-ordered instructions; the writer is trying to work within the limits of a form

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Score Point 5: Mid-101 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- Essay provides an organized response to the topic
- No major violations of conventions are noted
- The writer's voice is firm with conviction, although his/her ideas may not be especially persuasive
- Logic is apparent and coherent

Score Point 6: High 101 Placement

Essay evidences all or some of the following features:

- Essay provides a well-organized response to the topic and maintains a central focus
- A sense of pattern development is present from the beginning to the end
- The writer presents original, sophisticated ideas; he/she does not depend on clichés or standard perspectives
- The reasons supporting the writer's views are explicitly stated and clearly demonstrated; minimal confusion is felt by the reader
- The writer's logic is clear and coherent; relationships between and among ideas are established
- Details are plentiful and relevant
- Grammatical errors are infrequent and do not distract the reader
- The essay is persuasive and the writer manages his/her subject with sincerity and conviction

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